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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 000527

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP (BMASILKO), NEA/PPD (DBENZE)

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KPAO KU

SUBJECT: KUWAIT MEDIA REACTION: U.S. SOLDIERS INFECTED WITH H1N1

REF: KUWAIT 515

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) Summary and Comment. On the evening of Saturday, May 23, news of confirmed cases of H1N1 influenza among U.S. military personnel transiting Kuwait to Iraq broke in the local and international media. The story ran on the front page of all local papers, and on local, regional, and pan-Arab television channels on May 24. All stories reflected the available press guidance and statements from the Kuwaiti Ministry of Health. On Sunday, May 24, the Ministry of Health held a press conference to explain the GOK position and measures taken to contain the spread of disease. On Monday, May 25, all the Kuwaiti local newspapers reported positively on the press conference, echoing the GOK statement that Kuwait remains safe from H1N1 influenza. The Embassy continues to monitor the press and respond to queries in close consultation with Kuwaiti government officials and U.S. military officers. End Summary and Comment.

KUNA's Reporting

¶2. (U) The Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) was the first local media organization to break the story, posting on its website May 23 the press guidance from the U.S. Embassy and the statement from the Ministry of Health. Kuwaiti Undersecretary at the Ministry of Health, Dr. Ibrahim Al-Abdulhadi, told KUNA that "health officials discovered that the U.S. soldiers were infected with swine flu once they arrived in Kuwait, so they were completely quarantined in their military base. Most of infected soldiers left Kuwait already and the rest were treated in the military base hospital. They would be leaving the country later. Kuwait is safe, he confirmed, and was following the recommendations and measures of the World Health Organization." KUNA posted as well the U.S. Embassy statement saying it "was aware that the H1N1 influenza cases have been tentatively confirmed among U.S. military personnel assigned abroad, including soldiers transiting via U.S. military bases in Kuwait." It affirmed as well that "they have not come into any contact with the Kuwaiti population." The Embassy added that the U.S. and Kuwaiti governments "have closely coordinated monitoring and response measures."

The below are KUNA's links:

<http://www.kuna.net.kw/NewsAgenciesPublicSite /ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2000380&Language=en>

<http://www.kuna.net.kw/NewsAgenciesPublicSite /ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2000388&Language=en>

News Headlines

¶3. (U) The headlines of the main five Kuwaiti newspapers on Sunday, May 24, before the press conference, affirmed that Kuwait was H1N1 free.

Moderate Arabic local daily Al-Qabas:

- "18 U.S. Soldiers in Kuwait are Infected with the Swine Flu but they were Isolated"
- "They have not Come into any Contact with the Kuwaiti Population"

Conservative Arabic local daily Al-Watan:

- "American Soldiers in Kuwait are Infected with H1N1"
- "Major Kristi Beckman: Kuwait Agreed Upon Each Person Quarantined in Military Facilities"
- "U.S. Embassy is Coordinating with the Ministry of Health to Guarantee the Safety of Kuwait's Population"
- "Kuwait Has Never Let Anybody Enter the Country Without Being Inspected and the American Soldiers do the Test Within Five Days"
- "Ministry of Health: It is in Our Interest to Quarantine Any Infected Person who Might Transmit the Infection"

Liberal Arabic daily Al-Rai:

- "18 American Soldiers in Kuwait are Infected with Swine Flu"
- "They were Quarantined in Their Military Base and the U.S. Embassy

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Affirmed that they have not Come into Contact With the Population"

Pro-Government Arabic daily Al-Anbaa:

- "Swine Flu is on the Kuwaiti doorstep!"

Pro-Government Arabic daily Al-Seyassah:

- "Swine Flu in Kuwait and the Ministry of Health is on its Nerves"
- "The Ministry has Called for an Urgent Meeting of the Flu Combat Committee and the Civil Defense is in Stand-By Mode"
- "18 Confirmed H1N1 Cases of American Soldiers who were Isolated in Camp Arifjan"
- "Concerns that the Disease Might Spread Because the Incoming Foreign Forces do not go Through Precautionary Measures"

- "Tampa U.S. Central Command Spokesperson Affirmed that the Infected Soldiers are Still in Kuwait but in a Late Statement the Ministry of Health Said that Some of them Have Left the Country" Both conservative Al-Watan and pro-government Arabic daily Al-Seyassah sourced information to the U.S. Central Command statement confirming 18 H1N1 cases among U.S. soldiers at an American military base in Kuwait. The Al-Seyassah report also highlighted the entry and exit of U.S. soldiers through military bases and not official Kuwait border crossings.

Television Coverage

¶4. (U) Local TV channels Al-Rai and Kuwait TV, regional Al-Manar Television (Hezbollah owned and operated) and Pan-Arab Al-Arabiya all broadcast the story, based on KUNA's initial report. The TV channels hosted high-ranking Kuwaiti officials, who affirmed that Kuwait is H1N1 free and all necessary measures have been taken to resolve the issue of the American soldiers. Hezbollah's Al-Manar reported in its Arabic morning news on Sunday, May 24 that there is an unknown number of infected U.S. soldiers that transferred the flu to Kuwait. Al-Manar added that this was the first instance of the

flu in Kuwait and in the Gulf. However, on Al-Manar's English website, the issue was confined solely to the statements from the U.S. Embassy and the Kuwaiti Ministry of Health with no commentary.

Press Conference Coverage

¶5. (U) All newspapers on Monday, May 25, reported positively on the Ministry of Health press conference, most took information and details from the KUNA report:

<http://www.kuna.net.kw/NewsAgenciesPublicSite /ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2000589&Language=en>. The below is a sample of how the local press covered the story:

- Moderate Arabic daily Al-Qabas published a full page report on the Kuwaiti Ministry of Health press conference, which took place at the Ministry on May 24, under the headline: "Story of the American soldiers infected with H1N1 Flu." The two main sub-headlines of the report read, "16 out of the infected 18 have left the country after five have been cured;" and "The two remaining soldiers have been released from the quarantine quarters after showing signs of improvement."

Editorial

¶6. Only moderate Arabic daily Awan devoted an editorial to the H1N1 issue. Chief Editor Mr. Ousama Al-Rantisi gave an objective summary of the events regarding how the news became public and how both the GOK and the USG handled the issue; he thanked both governments for their coordination. However, he also asked several rhetorical questions, such as: "When exactly did the infected soldiers enter Kuwait? From where did they come? Did they enter through the Kuwait International Airport? How come they did not come into contact with Kuwait's population? Did they all come here from the same American State? Did they leave infected or they were reported infected after they entered Kuwait? Did the American authorities inform the WHO initially or after they notified the Kuwaiti authorities?" Al-Rantisi also mentioned that Awan sent one reporter and one photographer to an American aircraft carrier three weeks ago, "therefore the question is does the quarantine include all those who have come close to American soldiers? "Were these cases detected before or after Awan's visit to the carrier? We have lots of questions and little information. In this case how can we rest assured that our health condition is not at risk?"

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